

Joe Bustillos

ED 502 Teaching Reading

06-24-93

Journal Articles: Engaging Children in Literature: Understanding plot structures, by Donna E. Norton.

Understanding "story structure" is one of the cues to effective reading, according to our classes of the past two days. Donna Norton seems to agree and suggests "developing" students' sense of story by early on reading them stories with strong plot development. She suggests having the students act out the roles and identify such things as character, action and sequence. The sequence part seems to have a special importance to her. She spends some time discussing ways to talk about what happened in what order.

For a beginning reader the intrinsic significance of "plot development" will no doubt be overlooked, but as we have discussed, its importance contributes to the ability of beginning readers to comprehend the story and its meaning. Without filling out a stair step diagram a beginning reader would recognize that something is amiss if "All the king's horse and all the king's men could put Humpty back together again" before he'd been told that Humpty Dumpty was hanging out on a fence. The diagram may aid the learning, but it also may muddle. At its best it gives names to parts of story-telling that the beginning reader may already be aware of. At its worse it may lock a student into thinking about story and plot in a limited fashion when stories have a nasty tendency for moving beyond the stair-step diagram.

I think Norton's idea of getting stories with strong plot development is a great idea within the limitations of the stories in question. It's a bit like phonic---once you learn the basic rules, does it really aid in the understanding?

Strong structure is  
VIP. I will  
show some activities  
(story chart +  
storyboard)  
that help  
develop this.

Do they begin  
to understand  
plot dev.  
through  
telling?

Do you  
question  
whether or not  
they need to "plot"  
it out in order to  
understand the plot?

And - how  
do you learn the  
basic rules? Do  
they have to be  
explicitly taught?

Joe -

As a writer, what do you think about  
the diagrams?

How do they effect writing as well as reading?

Should we stick to only stories w/ strong plot for  
little kids?

# ENGAGING CHILDREN IN LITERATURE

## Understanding plot structures

Donna E. Norton, Texas A&M University

Many educators contend that developing children's sense of story (Rudman, 1989) is one of the most important aspects of literature-based reading. Researchers such as Barr and Sadow (1985) identify common story grammars that proceed from the setting to the problem to the goal and to the events that occur as the characters pursue the goal and obtain the resolution to the problem.

Helping students develop understandings of story grammars and plot structures enhances their comprehension of literature. Dole, Duffy, Roehler, and Pearson (1991) conclude that children of all ages can synthesize the plot structure of simple narratives such as folktales, but they have greater difficulty when they must relate the importance of each part of the story grammar to the themes developed in the story. I (Norton, 1992) recommend the use of plot structures to help students diagram plot development and relate important story events to characterization and theme. This column identifies strategies that teachers may use to help younger and older students understand various types of plot structures and to relate those plot structures to characterization and theme.

### Strategies for younger students

Listening to stories and acting out the sequence of actions through creative drama, drawing and illustrating plot diagrams, identifying plot structures in wordless books, and writing stories motivated by wordless books are all ways to help younger students understand plot structures.

Creative drama activities allow students to discover that stories include settings, characters, problems, and resolutions of problems, and that plot provides the framework for the rising action in a story. Through this activity students learn that stories have a beginning in which the conflict and characters are introduced, a middle in which the action moves toward a climax, and an ending in which a resolution is reached. Students discover that stories must have logical sequences that gradually build until conflict is resolved.

For a first drama activity, choose a nursery rhyme that has definite actions that cannot be interchanged while retaining the logical sequence. For example, "Little Miss Muffet" and "Humpty Dumpty" have such logical sequences. These rhymes are found in numerous sources, such as Tomie dePaola's *Mother Goose* (1985) and Michael Foreman's *Mother Goose* (Foreman, 1991). Read one of the rhymes to the students and ask them to identify the characters and their actions. Ask the students, "In what order did things happen in this rhyme? What happened first, second, and third? Do you think there are reasons for that order? What would happen if we tried to change the order?"

To verify the sequence, print each of the parts of the nursery rhyme on strips of paper. Put the strips in the wrong order and ask the students to act out the story. Ask, "What happens if what happened last is placed first? Do we still have a story? Why not?" Have the students act out the correct se-

quence and compare the stories.

Next, introduce a simple core book such as Jan Brett's adaptation of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1987). Read the story to the students and ask them to identify the characters, the setting, and the problem or conflict. Then ask them to list important events such as the following: (a) A wee bear, a middle-sized bear, and a huge bear walk in the woods while their porridge cools. (b) A girl comes to the cottage while the bears are away, tastes each bowl of porridge, and eats all the wee bear's porridge. (c) The girl tries each chair and breaks the wee bear's chair. (d) The girl tries each bed and falls asleep in the wee bear's bed. (e) The bears return and discover the disturbances. And (f) the girl wakes up when she hears the bears and runs away from the cottage.

Dramatize the story and discuss each of these important actions. Then show the students how to place their actions from a story onto a plot diagram (see Figure 1). Draw the shell of the diagram on the chalkboard. Some teachers of younger children choose to use the terms conflict, climax, turning point, and end of conflict on the diagram, while others wait until their students are older. Ask the students to either place their list of actions from the story onto this diagram or to place drawings that show each of the incidents on the diagram.

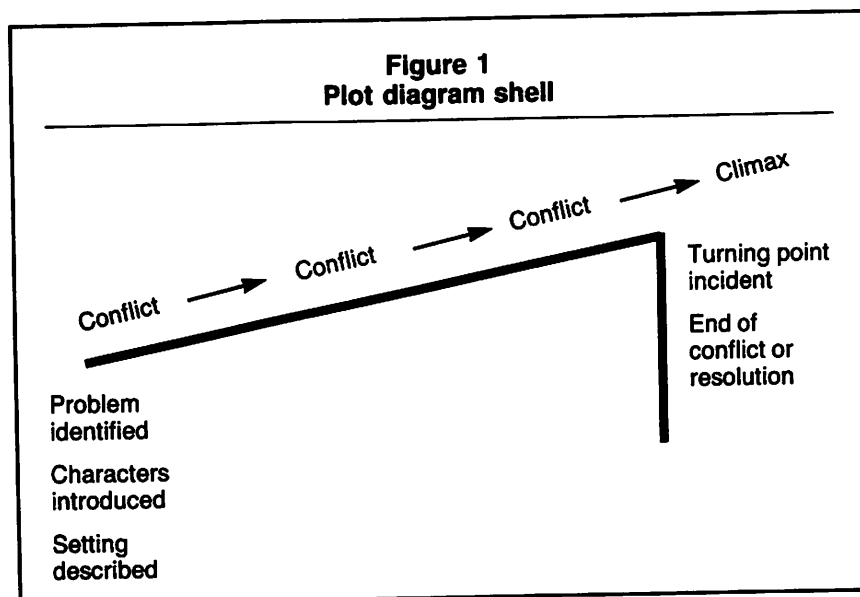
Next, introduce a wordless book such as David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991). Because there are very few words, the students will need to create their own text that includes setting,

characters, conflict, and important incidents that make up the story. The plot develops as frogs float through the air on lily pads, explore houses, chase dogs, eventually return to their watery homes, and leave perplexed people to try to solve the problem. Ask the students to make up a story that would follow a plot structure and to include all of the important elements in that plot structure. Wiesner's book also provides an excellent source for motivating creative writing. The illustrations end on the following Tuesday evening, but now pigs are beginning to fly and explore their neighborhood.

### Strategies for older students

Older students benefit from drawing plot diagrams for person-against-person and person-against-self plots and relating the plot diagrams to developing characterizations and themes. An excellent book for introducing plot structure to older students is John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (1987). Read the book and ask the students to identify the setting, characters, and conflict in the story. Encourage them to discuss their reactions to the characters and conflict. Then have them place the major incidents from the story on a plot diagram (see Figure 2). Ask the students, "Did each of the characters respond in the same way to the major incidents in the story? Why do you believe that there were differences between the responses of the greedy, selfish sister and the generous, kind sister? What do we call this type of conflict in literature?" Be sure that they understand that this is a person-against-person conflict because the two main characters have different motives and desires that are in conflict. Ask the students to not only plot the major incidents in the story but also to identify how each of the two characters responds to the incidents. This activity allows students to understand the motivation of the characters and to realize how the characters' motives relate to the conflict in the story. You can reread the story orally or allow students to reread the story themselves.

Next, ask the students to consider the themes that are developed in the



book. Ask them, "What is the author trying to tell us that would make a difference in our lives?" When I did this activity with fourth-grade students, they identified two themes: (a) Greed and selfishness are harmful, and (b) kindness and generosity are good. Then ask, "How do we know that these are the themes? What proof do we have in the book?" Review with the students the major ways that themes may be developed. For example, the artist may show the theme through the illustrations. Alternately, the author may reveal the theme through the characters' actions or thoughts, by the way the story ends, especially by what is rewarded and what is punished. Or the author may simply tell the readers the theme. After discussing how each of these proofs are used by the author and illustrator in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, add this information to the plot diagram.

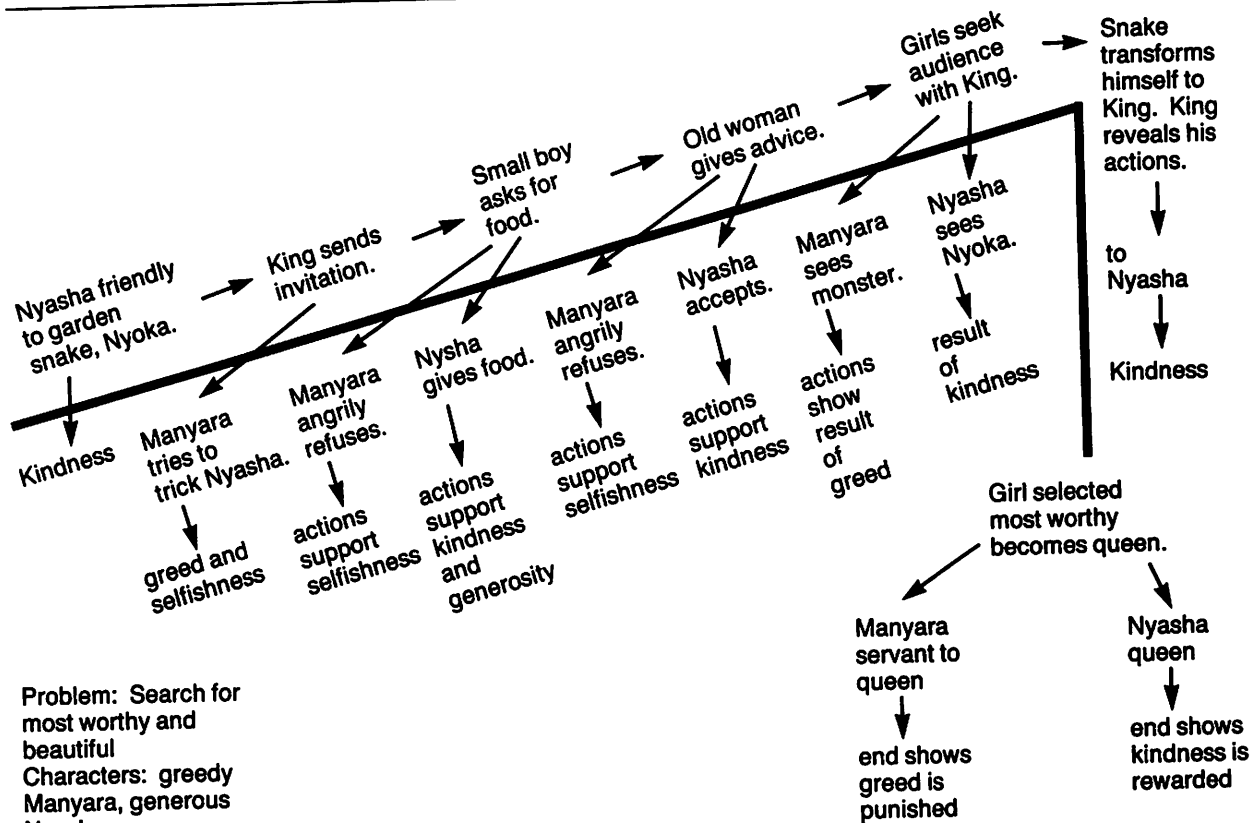
The plot diagram in Figure 2 was completed with the help of fourth-grade students. The plot diagram shows the major incidents, the reactions of each of the characters to the major incidents, and the relationship of each of the themes to those incidents.

Story structures in books for older students frequently develop plots

through person-against-self conflict. Students can use the same plot structure when plotting books in which characters try to overcome problems caused by inner conflicts. Now, however, the terminology changes. Cohen (1985) identifies four major components in the development of person-against-self conflicts: problem, struggle, realization, and achievement of peace or truth.

To teach this plot structure, draw the diagram on the chalkboard and discuss the meanings of the terms *problem*, *struggle*, *realization*, and *achievement of peace or truth*. Even with older students, you may introduce this concept through an easier-to-read picture book such as Arthur Yorinks's *Hey, Al* (1986). Ask the students to identify the setting (a dilapidated apartment), the characters (Al and his dog), and the problem (Al wants a better way of life and must decide what he is willing to do to achieve it). Ask the students to identify the increasing struggle as Al first lives without working on a paradise island but then must make a personal decision when he and his dog begin their transformation into birds. Ask them to identify the point of self-realization as Al decides that it is better to live as a human back in his apartment than to live as a bird in para-

**Figure 2**  
**Plot diagram for *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters***



dise. Ask students to identify the moment when they know Al has achieved peace and truth (his dog returns and he paints his apartment yellow). Students may discuss how the illustrations follow the increasing action and the achievement of peace and truth: The size of the illustrations increases as the conflict increases and the yellow end papers symbolize the achievement of peace and truth.

Next introduce a book such as Paula Fox's *One-Eyed Cat* (1984) in which the author develops person-against-self conflict. The students may speculate about the possible inner conflicts in this story as they look at the cover illustration and discuss the impact of the colors used, the transparent look of the boy holding the air rifle, and the placement of the one-eyed cat as if it dominates the story and Ned's

thoughts. Ask the students to speculate about why so many authors of books for older students develop plots about the inner conflicts of their heroes and heroines. As the students read or listen to *One-Eyed Cat*, they should identify incidents from the book that reveal the problem, Ned's increasing struggle with himself, his self-realization, and his achievement of peace or truth. The plot diagram in Figure 3 shows major incidents identified by a group of sixth- and seventh-grade students.

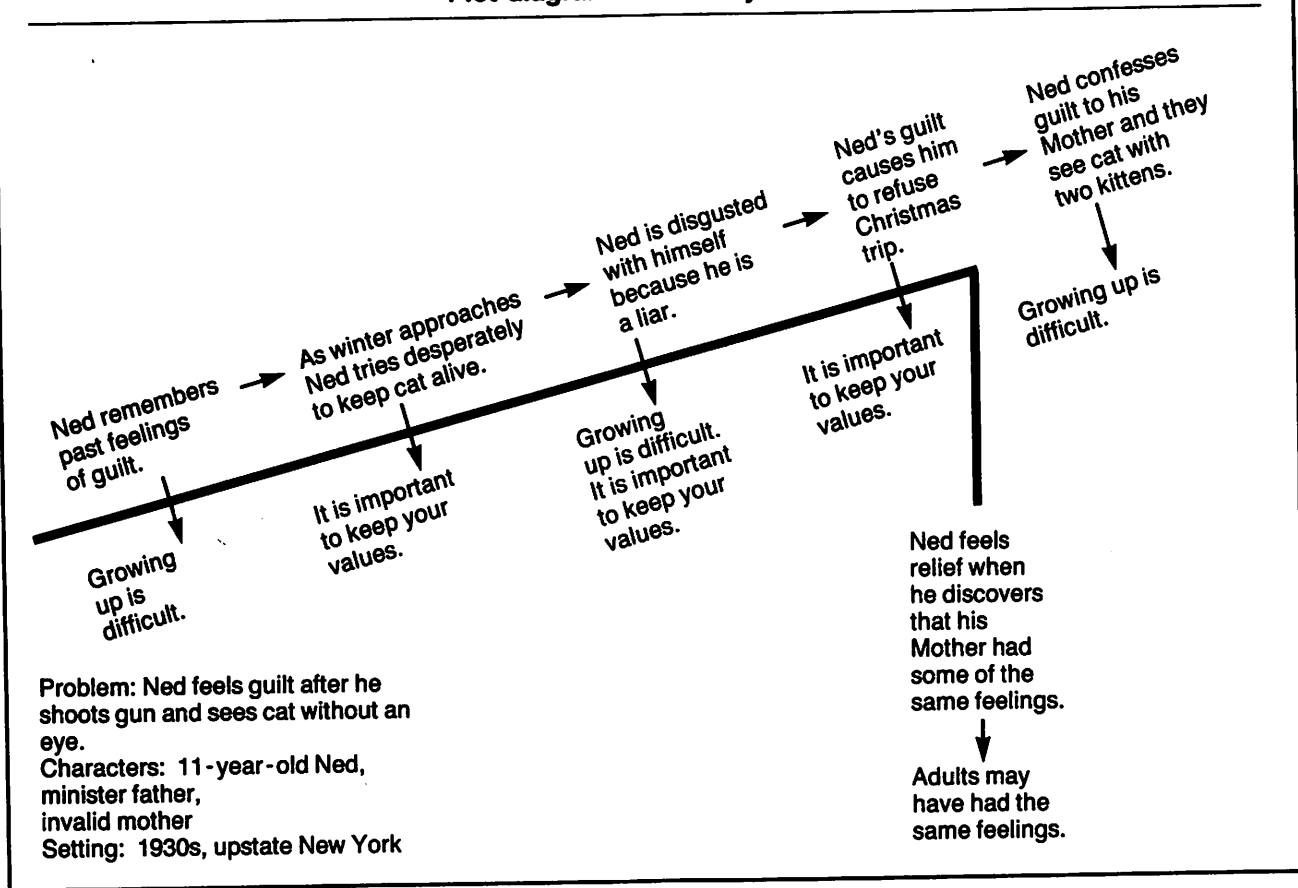
After they completed the diagram, the students identified the themes and discussed how each of the themes is related to the increasing struggle, the moment of self-realization, and the achievement of peace and truth. For example, they identified and discussed the interrelationships between the incidents on the plot diagram and the fol-

lowing themes: Growing up is often difficult; it is important to keep your values; and adults may have had the same feelings as children. They also discussed how each of the incidents on the plot diagram revealed Ned's character.

### Additional books that develop strong plot structures

After students have been involved in dramatizing, discussing, and plotting story structures, they should have many opportunities to read and respond to additional books that have easily recognized plot structures or that allow them to apply the relationships between plot structures, characterization, and theme. The following books are useful for extended reading activities and for recreational reading:

**Figure 3**  
**Plot diagram for One-Eyed Cat**



#### Lower elementary

- Calhoun's *High-Wire Henry* (1991) develops plot and conflict as a cat tries to prove that he is more clever than the new puppy.
- Ernst's *Miss Penny and Mr. Grubbs* (1991) develops plot and conflict as a jealous neighbor tries to ruin his neighbor's prize-winning vegetables. A surprising ending shows that Miss Penny remains a winner.
- Collington's wordless book *The Angel and the Soldier Boy* (1987) develops plot and conflict as two toy figures battle pirates.
- Mills's *The Rag Coat* (1991) develops plot and conflict as a mountain girl defends her coat to classmates who at first laugh at the coat made of clothing scraps.

#### Middle elementary

- Ames's *Grandpa Jake and the Grand Christmas* (1991) develops plot and conflict as a girl tries to retain her dreams during the Depression. Interactions with Grandpa Jake, who deserted his family, help her overcome self doubts and retain her dream. The story develops themes that life would have no meaning without our dreams, and if we want something badly enough, there is usually a way to get it.
- Fleischman's *The Whipping Boy* (1986) develops plot and conflict as a prince and a common boy are kidnapped and respond in different ways to the same situations. The story develops themes that friendship is important and that

being considerate of others is beneficial.

- Paterson's *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* (1990) develops plot and conflict as a compassionate couple save mandarin ducks from a cruel lord. The story develops the theme that compassion is needed.

#### Upper elementary and middle school

- Bauer's *On My Honor* (1986) develops a person-against-self conflict when a boy breaks his word to his father and, as a consequence, his friend drowns.
- Hathorn's *Thunderwith* (1991) develops a person-against-self conflict when a girl living with her new family in the Australian outback must overcome fear and personal conflict after her mother's

death. The story develops the theme that developing understanding and love is crucial for everyone.

- Strachan's *The Flawed Glass* (1991) develops a person-against-self conflict as a handicapped girl living on an island off the coast of Scotland discovers that she has true worth. A parallel plot about a weak golden eagle that also survives provides interesting insights. The story develops themes about the power of persistence and not judging others on the strength of physical capabilities.

#### References

- Barr, R., & Sadow, M. (1985). *Reading diagnosis for teachers*. New York: Longman.
- Cohen, C.L. (1985). The quest in children's literature. *School Library Journal*, 31, 28-29.
- Dole, J., Duffy, G., Roehler, L., & Pearson, P.D. (1991). Moving from the old to the new: Research on reading comprehension instruction. *Review of Educational Research*, 61, 239-264.
- Norton, D.E. (1992). *The impact of literature-based reading*. New York: Merrill/Macmillan.

Rudman, M. (1989). Children's literature in the reading program. In M. Rudman (Ed.), *Children's literature: Resource for the classroom* (pp. 177-205). Needham Heights, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

#### Children's books cited

- Ames, M. (1991). *Grandpa Jake and the grand Christmas*. New York: Scribners.
- Bauer, M.D. (1986). *On my honor*. New York: Clarion.
- Brett, J. (1987). *Goldilocks and the three bears*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- Calhoun, M. (1991). *High-wire Henry*. New York: Morrow.
- Collington, P. (1987). *The angel and the soldier boy*. New York: Knopf.
- dePaola, T. (1985). *Mother Goose*. New York: Putnam.
- Ernst, L.C. (1991). *Miss Penny and Mr. Grubbs*. New York: Bradbury.

- Fleischman, S. (1986). *The whipping boy*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Foreman, M. (1991). *Michael Foreman's Mother Goose*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Fox, P. (1984). *One-eyed cat*. New York: Bradbury.
- Hathorn, L. (1991). *Thunderwith*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Mills, L. (1991). *The rag coat*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Paterson, K. (1990). *The tale of the mandarin ducks*. New York: LoDESTAR.
- Stephoe, J. (1987). *Mufaro's beautiful daughters: An African tale*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Strachan, I. (1991). *The flawed glass*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Wiesner, D. (1991). *Tuesday*. New York: Clarion.
- Yorinks, A. (1986). *Hey, Al*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Engaging Children in Literature is a column dealing with strategies that are beneficial for teaching with and about literature. Send questions, comments, and suggestions about the column, or children's books to be considered for the column, to Donna E. Norton, Department of Educational Curriculum and Instruction, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, USA.

## Brochure on acting for intellectual freedom

*Common Ground: The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association Speak with One Voice on Intellectual Freedom and the Defense of It.*

Prepared by the NCTE/IRA Joint Task Force on Intellectual Freedom, this informative pamphlet outlines four principles on intellectual freedom in education and includes a joint statement on intellectual freedom. It provides action plans and strategies for teachers, administrators, and parents on the local, state, national, and international level. Single copies are available free for a self-addressed, stamped business size envelope. (For requests outside the U.S., provide a self-addressed envelope.) Bulk orders of 100 copies are available for US\$7.00, prepaid. Contact Public Information Office, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714, USA.